



Living, Learning, & Leading in Residence Life: A Research Study

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The Benefits of Low-Income Students' Participation in Living Learning Leadership Programs

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Scholars have illuminated significant disparities in higher education degree attainment between college students from low-income and upper-income backgrounds. Instead of increasing social mobility of college students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, structural barriers prohibit many low-income and working-class students from entering into higher education and graduating (Soria, 2015). Sixty percent of students from high socioeconomic status backgrounds earned a bachelor's degree or higher within eight years compared with 14% of those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

While the extant research on the benefits of living in residence halls substantiates the vital role residential life plays in students' success (Astin, 1993; Blimling, 1989, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), the scholarship base about the benefits of on-campus living among students from lower-income backgrounds is underdeveloped (Lopez Turley & Wodkte, 2010), as is research around the impact specifically of living and learning leadership programs.

Research on the identities of students from lower-income backgrounds is also relatively absent in living and learning leadership literature, and most scholars fail to take into account the self-selection biases of students who participate in living-learning leadership communities. The purpose of our study is to examine whether participating in a living and learning *leadership* program might be associated with low-income students' resilience and sense of belonging. Students' resilience and belonging are factors commonly associated with low-income students' persistence and degree attainment in higher education.

Methods

We utilized data collected as part of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL), which was administered at 70 colleges and universities in spring 2018. The MSL is an international research program that examines the influence of higher education on undergraduates' leadership development and additional outcomes.

We narrowed our sample to only include students from low-income backgrounds ($n = 15,305$), defined as having parents or guardians earn less than \$74,999 per year. We used the cut-off value of \$74,999 because a majority (slightly under two-thirds, 63%) of students whose families earn less than \$74,999 receive a Pell grant (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-2016). Finally, after matching procedures, we narrowed our sample down to 2,142 students from low-income backgrounds (50% who had participated in a living learning leadership program and 50% who had not participated in a living learning leadership program).

In the survey, students responded to the question, "since starting college, to what degree have you been involved in the following types of leadership training or education: living learning leadership program?" which was originally scaled 0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = sometimes, and 3 = often. We collapsed the variable into two groups: 0 = never participated in a living learning leadership program and 1 = participated in a living learning leadership program at least once.

We utilized several measures as covariates in propensity score matching, including their high school leadership experiences; students' self-reported gender, age, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, citizenship, transfer status, first-generation status, and disability status; students' academic majors and self-reported grade point averages; and, institutional measures (i.e., size, setting, control, and Carnegie classification).

Our dependent measures included students' resilience and sense of belonging. We measured students' resilience through the 10-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10) (Campbell-Sills et al., 2009; Connor & Davidson, 2003). On the CD-RISC-10 scale, students rated their agreement (1 = not at all to 5 = true nearly all of the time) to items like "I am able to adapt when changes occur" and "I can deal with whatever comes my way." Additionally, we measured students' sense of belonging through three items (e.g., "I feel I belong on this campus") scaled 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Results

The results of our first analysis for resilience suggested that students from low-income backgrounds who participated in a living learning leadership program had significantly higher resilience compared to their matched group of peers who did not participate in a living learning leadership program ($\beta = .131$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .017$).

Additionally, students from low-income backgrounds who participated in a living learning leadership program had a significantly higher sense of belonging compared to their matched group of peers who did not participate in a living learning leadership program ($\beta = .142$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .020$).

Discussion & Limitations

The results of our study suggest that students from low-income backgrounds who participate in living learning leadership programs have a significantly higher level of resilience and sense of belonging compared to a matched group of low-income students who did not participate in living learning leadership programs.

There are potentially several reasons why we found that low-income students who participated in living learning leadership programs had higher levels of resilience and sense of belonging compared to their peers. For one, other scholars have detected positive relationships between participation in leadership programs and students' sense of belonging (Ribera et al., 2017) and students' participation in living learning programs and students' sense of belonging (Spanierman et al., 2013). While researchers have not yet investigated the relationships between participating in living learning programs or leadership programs on college students' resilience, Holdsworth et al. (2018) discovered that support networks are key attributes of college students' resilience.

It may be the case that the supportive community fostered within a leadership-specific program also helps low-income students to develop resilience and a sense of belonging; for instance, Soria and Werner (2018) discovered that students' participation in small leadership courses were associated with students' retention and graduation. Specific aspects of the leadership experiences may also be associated with the outcomes of resilience and belonging; for instance, Soria and Werner suggested that strengths-related programming, self-authorship frameworks, group projects, and other experiential activities embedded in leadership programs may facilitate student's belonging, leading to greater retention and graduation outcomes.

There are a few important limitations of the present study. For one, while we attempted to match students on several pre-college antecedents and experiences, demographic characteristics, and collegiate experiences in our analyses, we did not include additional factors that may have predicted students' involvement in living learning leadership programs.

Additionally, we do not know significant details about the living learning leadership programs, including content related to curriculum, size, structure, or programming. As a consequence, while the study presents some useful information about the potential benefits of living learning leadership communities for low-income students, additional research into the specific components of those programs that are associated with students' outcomes is recommended.

Recommended APA Citation

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About the Study

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